SPORT

Tsitsipas considered quitting tennis during 2025

PERTH: Stefanos Tsitsipas said on Thursday he seriously considered retiring from tennis in the depths of a struggle with serious back pain during much of the 2025 season.

But the former world number three, now ranked 36th after playing just two Davis Cup matches since a second-round exit at the US Open, said his ongoing medical treatment appeared to be paying dividends.

"I'm most excited to see how my actual training responds with regard to my back," the 27-year-old said as he prepared to open his 2026 campaign for Greece at the mixed-teams United Cup in Perth, Australia.

"My biggest concern was if I could finish a match," added the 2023 Australian Open finalist, who said the injury haunted him "for the last six or eight months".

"I would ask: 'Can I play another match without pain?' I got really scared after the US Open loss [to Germany's Daniel Altmaier]. I could not walk for two days. That's when you reconsider the future of your career."

Tsitsipas said that after various medical consultations he was now satisfied with his current care plan.

"My biggest win for 2026 would be to not have to worry about finishing matches," he said, adding that he completed five weeks of off-season training without pain. "It makes great feedback knowing you had a pre-season without pain — I hope it stays that way. I want to deliver for 2026 and the United Cup.

"I put in the work. The most important thing is full belief that I can come back to where I was. I will try everything to do that."

Greece have become regulars in the four-year history of the United Cup, played in Perth and Sydney, with fellow comeback hopeful Maria Sakkari, also a former world number three, joining Tsitsipas in the team.

"We are here again, with a good team and great spirit. We are prepared for war — we are Greek. We're going big," Tsitsipas said.

Greece are grouped with Naomi Osaka's Japan and the Emma Raducanu-led Britain.—AFP

MARRAKECH: Ivory Coast's Evann Guessand (top) heads to score against Gabon during their Africa Cup of Nations Group 'F' match at the Grand Stadium.—AFP

Ivory Coast top AFCON group ahead of Cameroon, Algeria win again

RABAT: Reigning champions Ivory Coast pipped Cameroon to top spot in their group after Algeria maintained their perfect record as the first round of the Africa Cup of Nations concluded on Wednesday.

The Ivorians and the Indomitable Lions of Cameroon came into their last Group 'F' matches with identical records, leaving open the possibility that a drawing of lots would be required to determine their final positions.

But in the end the Ivorians finished in first place in Group 'F' on goals scored after coming from two goals down to beat already-eliminated Gabon 3-2 while Cameroon defeated Mozambique 2-1.

Both sides finished on seven points with Mozambique on three points and Gabon on one. Mozambique go through as one of the four best third-placed sides.

Ivory Coast found themselves two goals behind after just 21 minutes in Marrakesh, with Guelor Kanga pouncing on a handling error by goalkeeper Alban Lafont to put Gabon in front.

Los Angeles FC marksman Denis Bouanga then fired in Gabon's second, leaving Emerse Fae's team up against it.

However, Wilfried Zaha squared for Jean-Philippe Krasso to pull one back just before the interval and Aston Villa's Evann Guessand headed in an 84th-minute equaliser.

The stage was then set for youngster Bazoumana Toure to get the winner for the Elephants in injury time.

Looking to become the first nation since Egypt in 2010 to retain the AFCON title, they will now play Burkina Faso in the last 16 in Marrakesh next Tuesday.

In Agadir, a great strike by Geny Catamo gave Mozambique the lead midway through the first half but Cameroon were level before the half-hour mark.

Nene somehow turned the ball into his own net after initially managing to deflect Frank Magri's shot onto the post.

A superb 55th-minute strike by the young Bayer Leverkusen forward Christian Kofane then gave Cameroon the win.

Finishing second in the section means five-time champions Cameroon will play South Africa in the last 16 in Rabat on Sunday.

Hosts Morocco or outsiders Tanzania will face the winners of that tie in the quarter-finals.

Meanwhile Mozambique, who are through to the knockout stage for the first time, will take on Nigeria next.

Two-time former champions Algeria completed the group stage with a perfect record as they beat Equatorial Guinea 3-1 in Rabat to finish with nine points from three games in Group 'E'.

With Algeria already through as group winners and Equatorial Guinea eliminated, nothing was riding on the game in Morocco's capital.

A much-changed Algeria team were three goals to the good by half-time, with Zineddine Belaid, Fares Chaibi and Ibrahim Maza all on target.

Emilio Nsue, top scorer at the last Cup of Nations, pulled one back for Equatorial Guinea early in the second half.

While Algeria play the Democratic Republic of Congo next, Burkina Faso will be waiting for Cameroon after the Stallions defeated Sudan 2-0 in Casablanca to finish second in the section.

Lassina Traore's early strike put Burkina Faso ahead at the Mohammed V Stadium before Algozoli Nooh missed a penalty for Sudan.

Arsene Kouassi, of French Ligue 1 side Lorient, sealed Burkina Faso's win late on.

Sudan finish third and have reached the AFCON knockout stages for just the second time since winning the trophy in 1970, despite the backdrop of a devastating war in the country between the army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces.

They will play much-fancied Senegal in the last 16 in Tangier on Saturday.

"It is good for everyone in Sudan and it is also good for the players as it is up to them to prove that they can play against a team like Senegal," said Sudan coach Kwesi Appiah. "Senegal is a big football country and we will be sure to play a very good game."

Thursday and Friday are rest days at the Cup of Nations in Morocco before the knockout phase begins on Saturday.—AFP

Osaka drawing inspiration from family at United Cup

PERTH: An excited Naomi Osaka will lean on family ties as she leads Japan in Friday's opening day at the United Cup in Australia, kicking off her season with a testing clash against former world number three Maria Sakkari.

Four-time Grand Slam champion Osaka, who won Australian Open titles in 2019 and 2021, said she was taking inspiration from her two-and-a-half-year-old daughter Shai as she began the new year.

"My daughter is an incentive, she's (always) in the back of my mind. There are a lot of incredible moms on the tour," the 28-year-old said in Perth on Thursday.

The 16th-ranked Osaka, who ended her 2025 season in mid-October with a leg injury, last faced Sakkari in 2021 with the Greek player, now ranked 52nd, dropping just four games in a resounding quarter-final win in Miami.

Osaka said her off-season had been a balancing act, but that she was feeling good.

"I was able to spend time with my daughter while I recovered from a long season, even if I didn't play the entire thing," said the former world number one. "My form will hopefully be good in my matches. I feel in shape and excited for the upcoming season."

Osaka had originally entered the ASB Classic in Auckland to kick off her season heading into the Australian Open at Melbourne Park on January 18, but had a change of plan.

"I enjoy the team atmosphere," she said. "I've wanted to play the United Cup for a long time. You get to play the best in the world straight off the bat."

The 18-nation mixed-team event opens with group matches in Perth, followed by Sydney a day later.

Ties comprise one men's and one women's singles and a mixed doubles, with group winners in each city advancing to the quarter-finals along with the best runner-up.

More than $11 million in prize money is at stake alongside ATP and WTA ranking points.

Osaka said becoming a mother had changed her outlook on tennis, which used to dominate her life.

"I used to take the wins and losses so seriously, they defined me as a person.

Now I take every day as a new opportunity to do better," she said. "My biggest role is not as a player but as a mother to my daughter.

"The off-season was difficult," she added. "I had to try to be there for her but there were moments when I had to train, I hope I'm handling it well. I hope when she's older that she understands why I did what I did."

Japan are also grouped with a British team led by Emma Raducanu.—AFP

COAS National Inter-Club Hockey from Jan 4

By Our Sports Reporter

LAHORE: The third Chief of Army Staff (COAS) National Inter-Club Hockey Championship will be played from Jan 4 to Feb 28, Pakistan Hockey Federation's secretary general Rana Mujahid said on Thursday.

Addressing a press conference at the National Hockey Stadium in Lahore, Mujahid said that the championship will be held in phases:

"The district/first phase will be held from Jan 4 to 24 while the national final phase will be staged from Feb 17 to Feb 28," Mujahid said.

He further said, "This tournament will serve a dual purpose. Beyond the competition, the PHF will utilise the event to conduct a thorough scrutiny of clubs across the country."[Moreover], to encourage grassroots participation, substantial prize money and rewards, on par with the high standards set last year, will be awarded to the winning teams and standout performers," the PHF official stated.

National Junior Snooker Championships to commence from Jan 5

KARACHI: Pakistan's top junior snooker players will compete at the Jahangir Khan Sports Complex here in Karachi for national titles and the chance to represent the country internationally, according to a press release issued by Pakistan Billiard and Snooker Association (PBSA) on Thursday.

The National Junior Under-17 Championship is scheduled to run from Jan 5-7. It will be immediately followed by the National Junior Under-21 Championship, which will take place from Jan 8-10.

A total of 16 players in each category, hailing from all four of Pakistan's provinces and the federal capital, Islamabad, are set to participate in the event, according to the press release.

The finalists in both the U17 and U21 championships will earn the right to represent Pakistan at the upcoming Asian Confederation of Billiard Sports and International Billiards & Snooker Federation Junior Championships later this year.—Sports Reporter

Neymar extending Santos deal: reports

SAO PAULO: Neymar has agreed to renew his contract with Santos until the end of 2026, a source close to the negotiations told AFP.

On Wednesday, Santos, Pele's former club, posted a cryptic video on social media showing an aerial view of their Vila Belmiro stadium with the date December 31, 2026, accompanied by the text: "The time is coming", without mentioning Neymar, whose initial contract expired at midnight on Dec 31.

Neymar's first season back at his first club was interrupted by injuries, but the 33-year-old scored four times as Santos won their last three games to move out of the relegation places on the final day of the season in December.

After the season, he underwent an operation to repair a damaged meniscus in his left knee. Santos said on Dec 22 that the operation was performed by Brazil's national team doctor and was succesful.

Neymar, who played for Barcelona, Paris Saint-Germain and Al-Hilal in Saudi Arabia is the top scorer for the Brazil with 79 goals, two more than Pele.

He has not played for the national teamsince October 2023, when he suffered a knee injury against Uruguay.—AFP

Ranking tennis continues

ISLAMABAD: The men's singles qualifying matches of the 11th Begum Kulsum Saifullah Khan National Ranking Tennis Championship matches were played here at the PTF Tennis Complex on Thursday.

Country's leading players, including Aqeel Khan, Muzammil Murtaza, Mohammad Shoaib, Barkatullah, Yousuf Khalil, Ahmad Nael, Hamza Roman, Mahin Aftab, Meheq Khokhar, Amna Ali, Sheeza Sajid and Soha Ali, are participating in the national event.

Over 250 entries have been received for different categories including men's singles, men's doubles, ladies singles, boys 18 & Under singles, boys 14 & Under singles, girls 14 & Under singles and boys 12 & Under singles.

The main draw matches start on Friday.

Results:

Men's singles (second qualifying round): Heera Asiq bt Aqil Khan 8-2; Inam Qadir bt Mohammad Rohan 8-1; Abdul Basit bt Adan Khan 8-4; Ahmed Babr bt Mohammad Ahmed 8-1; Rayan Khan bt Bilal Qadir 8-0; Faizan Fayyaz bt Mohammad Ayyan 8-0; Idrees Saqib bt Ahsan Ali 8-2; Hassan Usmani bt Mustafa 8-0; Ibrahim Bin Sohail bt Mamoon 8-3.—APP

Argentine football body in turmoil ahead of World Cup

BUENOS AIRES: In March 2024, retired Argentine football star Carlos Tevez published a tweet hinting at something suspicious going on in a Buenos Aires suburb. The treasurer of the Argentine Football Association, Tevez claimed, was making many trips to Pilar, where he implied the soccer official had buried bags of money and kept a collection of antique cars.

Coalicion Civica, a progressive political party, began investigating after Tevez's post and filed a criminal complaint centered on a mystery villa in Pilar.

As the World Cup approaches, allegations that the villa may have been used for money-laundering have become one of a series of scandals gripping the soccer association that is in charge of the game in Argentina, the current world champions. In early December, police raided the AFA headquarters and more than a dozen soccer clubs as part of a money-laundering probe that looked at transfers of money tied to clubs and a financial services company.

Three days later, authorities raided the Pilar villa, finding a heliport, stables and 54 vehicles, including luxury cars and collectible cars. In its criminal complaint, Coalicion Civica alleges the property is a front for a money-laundering scheme connected to Chiqui Tapia, the president of the AFA, and its treasurer, Pablo Toviggino. Last week, in another case, a prosecutor charged Tapia, Toviggino and other AFA leaders for unlawful retention of taxes totaling $13 million following a complaint from Argentina's tax agency, according to news outlet *La Nacion*.

The AFA did not respond to an inquiry from Reuters requesting an interview with both Tapia and Toviggino and for comment on the various judicial investigations that have been opened.

In a public statement, the association has said it is being attacked by the government of President Javier Milei, referring to how Milei has pushed for Argentina's football clubs, which have long functioned as nonprofit entities run by their members, to become for-profit companies under private owners.

"We are on the right path," the AFA said, listing competitions Argentina has won since Tapia became president in 2017, including the World Cup itself in 2022. A representative for Tevez did not respond to an interview request. Toviggino did not respond to a request for comment.

CRISIS DESPITE SUCCESS

Despite plaudits for Argentina's performance on the field, the AFA is going through its biggest crisis in years.

"There are two AFAs," said Nestor Centra, an Argentine sports journalist, referring to its international success and the instability at home.

Several months after Tevez's tweet, Matias Yofe, president of Coalicion Civica's branch in Pilar, told Reuters that he and his colleagues talked to about 10 employees who had worked at the Pilar property and presumed that Toviggino or Tapia were the owners.

One person, Yofe said, described Tapia once arriving by helicopter and then gifting employees football jerseys.

"What they described was they moved as owners of the place, they got in the pool, used the facilities," Yofe said. "Everyone indicated that this belongs to people of the AFA."

Coalicion Civica's complaint alleged that the property had been purchased in 2024 by a company owned by Ana Lucia Conte and Luciano Nicolas Pantano, a mother and son that it claimed could not afford the purchase.

An attorney who has represented Pantano did not respond to a request for comment. Records viewed by Reuters indicate that the property, several city blocks long, was bought for $1.8 million, although experts suspect it's worth much more. The complaint points to Pantano's connections with the football world, such as serving as the head of the Argentine Civil Association of Futsal and Beach Football.

According to court documents, officials during the raid found a black imitation leather bag branded with the AFA logo and Toviggino's name, several books on football and a plaque honoring Toviggino.

The 54 vehicles included a Ferrari and several Porsches, registered under the company the complaint attributed to Pantano and Conte. An official with knowledge of the case said that Toviggino's relatives had authorization to drive at least several of the cars, confirming a report by local television station TN. Authorities have requested information on the pilots who used the heliport in the hopes of learning about the passengers.

The justice ministry has demanded that the AFA and the Superliga, an association that handles transmission rights of matches, give explanations for accounting entries of nearly half a billion dollars going back to 2017. Daniel Vitolo, the head of the ministry's Inspector General's office, told Reuters that those amounts fall into categories on balance reports with generic names such as others." The Superliga declined a request from Reuters for comment.

"If the AFA really has its papers in order, why doesn't it explain something that's very easy to explain?" he said.

'THESE THINGS HAPPEN'

Experts said its unlikely that the judicial cases will affect Argentina's participation in the World Cup. "No one can pay the political cost of doing that," said Alan Wilder, a sports law attorney in Buenos Aires. "No one would approve of the mere idea of taking [Lionel] Messi out of the World Cup, with this possibly being his last World Cup. He's the sacred cow."

Football worldwide is no stranger to financial scandals, and in recent years top FIFA officials have been charged with corruption.

Tapia's predecessor resigned amid an investigation into irregularities involving management of match broadcasting funds. Those charged in the case were absolved this month. Prior to the current scandals, AFA had already faced criticism by fans for favoritism. Many were angered when the AFA recently awarded Rosario Central, home team of national star player Angel Di Maria, a new and controversial trophy.

"I think the lid has been blown off the pot," said Enzo Gutierrez, 30, a Buenos Aires resident who roots for the team San Martin. "It has grabbed my attention a lot but if you're a football fan you live knowing that these things happen in Argentine football."—Reuters